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Web 2.0 and the Net Generation - A Critical Perspective

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Introduction

In the recent years, social media and web 2.0 have been hot topics within educational debates and within the research area of networked learning. The latter is evident from symposia and papers from the last years' networked learning conferences, but also European research projects, special issues, and books have revolved around social media, web 2.0, personal learning environments, student-centred learning, and student-generated content. Alongside these internet developments we have witnessed debates on what schools and universities can do to cater to the 'net-generation' or the 'digital natives' in, or coming to, our educational institutions.

Bennett et al. (2008) have likened some of the vocal calls for immediate educational change as 'academic moral panics' based on unsubstantiated speculations about a coming generation of digital natives with unprecedented high digital literacy. More and more evidence seems to suggest that the young people, who actually seem to fit the category of digital natives are a minority or elite, rather than a widespread phenomenon within an entire generation (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010; Kennedy, Judd, Dalgarno, & Waycott, 2010). At the same time it is becoming increasingly clear that the use of web 2.0 technologies among young people is not as widespread or advanced as assumed. The use is more often for mundane purposes and entertainment, which runs counter to the envisioned or imagined educational ideals of using web 2.0 technologies for scholarly knowledge creation and sharing (Clark, Logan, Luckin, Mee, & Oliver, 2009; Selwyn, 2009)

These are also issues we wish to address and contribute to in this symposium. The symposium consists of three papers, which all draw on data collected among students in Aalborg University (AAU), Denmark. AAU is characterised by its problem and project based pedagogy (called the Aalborg PBL model). The main pedagogical principles within the PBL model of AAU is organised around problem-orientation, project work, inter-disciplinarily, and participant controlled learning. The pedagogy is based on students' enquiry into scientific and social problems as part of their learning process. In AAU, each semester is therefore organized around approximately 50% course work and 50% project work in groups, where students collaborate on writing their semester project. The students work closely together for an extended period of time (app. 4 months) on producing a project report reflecting the work with their self-chosen problem.

In the first paper Ryberg & Larsen (2012) analyse 130 blog postings made by first semester students in the programme Humanistic Informatics. They ask what characterises these young university students coming to university for their first semester. They emphasise and draw out the ambivalences and anxieties which are related to students own perceptions of and attitudes towards networked technologies. They argue, that the young university students share many concerns and fears with their older, and alleged 'digital immigrant' teachers. They critically ask, whether the broad educational uptake of social media within educational institutions is a student driven enterprise and desire?

In the second paper Nicolajsen (2012) analyses a case study or educational experiment from own teaching practice. The course analysed is an elective course for 4th semester students in the programme Humanistic Informatics. In the course students were introduced to a number of web 2.0 tools and practices and were asked to use these as part of their collaborative learning. The author demonstrates how the use of web2.0 for social learning may be used in ways with extended levels of student control. Using Web.20 for social learning in this way demands for extended responsibilities, changed behaviour and opens up for social mechanism with both positive and negative outcome regarding the students learning processes.

In the third paper Khalid, Rongbutri & Buus (2012) present data from a survey (across the student population at AAU), and observations, interviews, and analysis of blog postings (from 1st and 2nd semester students in the programme Humanistic Informatics). They show how many web 2.0 tools and practices are relatively unknown among many students, and they suggest strategies for how teachers and institutions might provide better facilitation for adoption of new technologies among students. They do so by creating a broad mapping of

students' (scattered) knowledge of various web 2.0 tools, and how these tools could potentially be adopted for particular learning activities and for particular phases in relation to students' problem and project based learning.

The common theme among the papers is that the adoption and implementation of social media technologies among the new 'generation' of students, albeit these are considered to be particularly skilled, is far from seamless. All the papers point out that many of the students are not heavy users of a complex bricolage of web 2.0 tools, which they can unproblematically weave into their academic activities; rather it seems that they are in need of pedagogical, academic and technological facilitation. As the papers all report data from AAU, and in particular from the programme Humanistic Informatics, we remain careful in drawing general conclusions, or creating an opposing (an equally faulty) description of 'a generation' of students; rather we wish to explore the diversity in attitudes and opinions in relation to networked technologies. What might be worth noting about the student population in AAU would be that they (at least after their first semester) have experiences with collaborative, self-directed learning (through the problem and project based learning); and yet, as analysed in Nicolajsen (2012), some remain cautious about being granted increased control and self-direction as part of a course.

Debates around web 2.0 technologies have had generative and creative power, and introduced a host of new educational technologies and practices. However, many of the pedagogical ideals being uniquely attributed to the web 2.0 wave (e.g. student-centred learning, collaborative learning or the like) actually have a much longer history within e.g. Networked Learning, Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) or Problem Based Learning (Ryberg, Glud, Buus, & Georgsen, 2010). In many ways, the web 2.0 wave might have re-vitalised these ideals, but we are wondering whether a focus on the technologies and discourses on "change" might have caused us to lose sight of the ideals.

Some of the more provocative questions we wish to take up during the symposium are related to some of the maybe overstated expectations of the coming generations. But also the reliance on how certain technologies might automatically incur pedagogical changes, and immediately resonate with students' out-of-school experiences with technology.

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